

NOTES for Sermon on Psalm 139. Who are you? Who am I?

If we were to ask the writer "Who do you think you are?", his first response might be the first word of the Psalm: **LORD**. *"O LORD you have searched me and known me"*.

"LORD" in capital letters in our Bibles is a way of writing Yahweh, the personal name of the God of Israel. This was

- God, the Creator of heaven and earth.
- God who had called Abraham to be the father of God's people.
- God who had led God's people out of slavery in Egypt and given them their land.
- God who had anointed David the shepherd boy as King... God of the Exodus,
- God of the covenant,
- God of faithful, steadfast love.

The LORD is my Shepherd, my Rock, my light, my stronghold, my deliverer.

"Who are you?" we might ask the poet. "I am one of the LORD's people!" and if you want to know more about me, I will need to reply in terms of my relationship with the LORD.

He focusses especially on three things:

(i) The first is that **"The LORD knows me"**.

Psalm 139.1-6

"LORD, you have searched me and known me."

This psalm is a prayer: *O LORD, you have searched me and known me* (Ps 139.1). You know everything about me. (Ps 139.2-5); and it is too wonderful

(verse 6). The poet is describing God's supreme knowledge over his whole life. Everywhere he is conscious of God's discerning gaze. The language of "searching" is about God's discerning judgements.

The knowledge that is too wonderful (v.6), is that God, the Creator of heaven and earth, knows me!

The New Testament says the same:

'Anyone who loves God is known by him' (1 Cor 8.3);

'You have come to know God, as rather to be known by God '(Gal 4.9).

At a Confirmation, the Bishop says to the candidate: "God has called you by name, and made you his own."

God knows me!

(ii) The second thing about the poet says about his relationship with the LORD, is that **God is always present with me."**

Ps 139.7-12:

Where can I go from your Spirit? (verse 7); I cannot escape you - wherever I go, you are there. This is the reaction of someone who is awestruck at the greatness of God. Even in the darkest of places, God is in the light. God is in heaven, even in Sheol; even across the widest ocean. But wherever he is, he trusts that God's hand is leading him; and God's right hand is holding on to him. He cannot even hide in the dark.

God is with me!

When we turn to the New Testament, one of the first things said about Jesus is that his name is Emmanuel, which means "God is with us."

We need to hold on to that when things are hard; when circumstances seem to be filled with confusion, even violence, uncertainty and sometimes fear. God is with us.

(iii)The third thing the poet tells us about his relationship with the LORD, is that God who is all-knowing, and ever-present was even **present at the start of my life.**

Ps 139.13-18.

The amazing thing is that God, the Creator of heaven and earth, God the covenant LORD, God created me!

It was you who formed my inward parts ...I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. (v. 13 -14). The poet realises that the meaning of his whole life is found in his belonging to God. His very body in its intricacies and life-sustaining properties is the work of the Creator. It is because God has made everything that God knows everything. So the poet bows down in wonder and trusting faith. *Wonderful are your works, that I know very well.* (v.14). The poet cannot get beyond the mystery of God: there are things that he simply trusts to God in wonder, which he cannot himself comprehend.

St Paul has this same sense of wonder when he writes about Jesus Christ: "For from him, and through him, and to him. are all things: to him be glory for ever and ever."

Then there is a shock!

How wonderfully lyrical and powerful these verses 1 - 18 from Psalm 139 are. We are drawn into the faith of the psalmist, who knows that God knows him, is ever present with him, and is intimately part of his own life from birth to death.

Then, suddenly, we are into four verses of anger and hatred against enemies!
What is going on here?

Psalm 139.19-24

These verses suggest that the poet is aware of a huge injustice, of "enemies" speaking maliciously about God and plotting evil. They are God's enemies, and therefore the poet counts them as his enemies also.

Is this, perhaps, describing some of the injustices perpetrated on God's people during their exile? Or was it a personal injustice against the poet? Would that cause the poet's urgent prayer? Will God defeat these enemies, and confront their injustice? He is enraged because God is all-knowing, ever-present, and all powerful and it is this God upon whom God's and his enemies have turned their back. So his prayer turns towards these enemies of God, and to the enemies of God's people. It concerns those who hate God, and whose bloodthirstiness and malice rises up against God for evil.

We remember that everywhere, this poet is conscious of God's discerning gaze. The language of "searching" is about God's discerning judgements. Maybe when he comes to face the wickedness which so enrages him, the poet realises that God will know of that, too. When he remembers that God is present with him. even in Sheol; even across the widest ocean, even in the dark, perhaps even the darkness of the malice which has so distressed the poet can be brought into the light of God?

God the Creator, is also the discerning Judge. The poet is able to bring all his pain and anguish into prayer, and lay it at the feet of the Judge of all.

The closing paragraphs are uncomfortable reading for followers of the Jesus who taught us to love our enemies. It can only make sense once we have read verses 1-18. Perhaps the poet's strength of feeling is best understood as strong zeal for the honour of God, when God is being abused. It is an almost defiant attitude of trust in God's faithfulness, in spite of all the evil around, that the poet

dares to express his deepest feelings so strongly. He believes that God understands. He wants God to drive out the 'men of blood' who are bent on destruction and malice. It is God who is ultimately judge of all.

We need to recall some of this when we turn on our TV's and wonder about the future of our society, the future of political turmoil in different places; when we are conscious of injustice and do not know how to deal with it. God the Creator is the discerning Judge of all things. We all belong to God and so are accountable to God. God give us grace to bring our uncertainties and even our outrages into prayer before the one who is LORD of all.

So! Remember who you are: I am one of the LORD's people made by God, known by God, and with whom God is ever present; but I am in a world in which there is disorder and malice, war-making and sin, and I need God's rescue and liberation.

So at the end, perhaps as reassurance, the poet asks for God's discerning gaze on himself.

Psalm 139. 23-24.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

Search me, O God: I do not want to be found among the wicked; I want to remain one of the LORD's people, made by God, known by God, and knowing the God is with us, all of my life from beginning to end.

Some discussion questions:

Questions:

How do you feel about God knowing everything about you?

Did the psalm-writer want to escape from God? (See verses 7-12) Why would he want to escape?

Can you say, “God, I am wonderfully made” (v 14)? What do you think that means?

‘If only you would slay the wicked, O God’ (19). I hate those who hate you, O Lord’ (21). Do you feel the same?